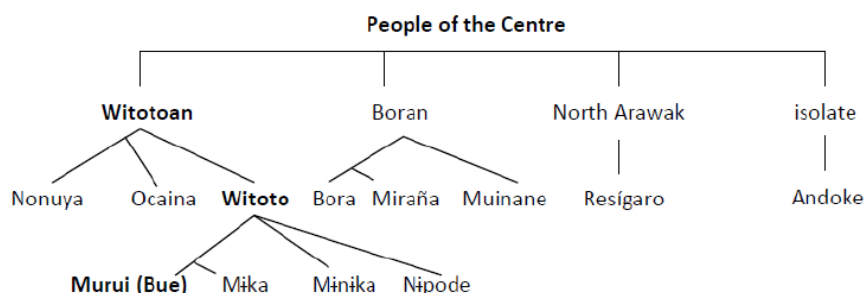


Special Workshop  
*The secret and the sacred:  
 working out hidden knowledge*  
 16 Nov 2017

**Understanding the Origin Myth:  
 the unknowns of the linguistic fieldwork among the 'Witoto' peoples  
 from Northwest Amazonia**

Kasia Wojtylak  
 LCRC (JCU)  
[katarzyna.wojtylak@jcu.edu.au](mailto:katarzyna.wojtylak@jcu.edu.au)

- This paper focuses on the Origin Myth of the Murui, a Witotoan group from Northwest Amazonia.
- Murui people (about 2,000 in total) are located in southern Colombia (Putumayo, Cara-Paraná, and Igara-Paraná rivers) and northern Peru (Ampi Yacú and Napo rivers) (the C-P area) (see Map 1) (Wojtylak 2017a).
- Loss of language and culture. Transformation of cosmologies.
- Murui is one of the 8 ethnolinguistic groups that form a cultural area called also the 'People of the Center' (Echeverri 1997) (see Map 1).



- The term 'People of the Centre' refers to a cultural 'network' of common customs which are not shared with groups outside the C-P area (Wojtylak 2017b).
- They share relative cultural homogeneity (Eriksen 2011), including :
  - trade specifications ('Witoto' - tobacco and hammocks; Bora - mats and woven products),
  - multilingualism (but different from the Vaupes) and intermarriage,
  - common practises that include the *manguaré* drums,
  - traditional dance rituals,
  - ritual activities that relate to the consumption of pounded coca and liquid tobacco,
  - other: patrilineality, the shape of their traditional houses, mythological heroes.
- 'People of the Centre' (known in Colombia and Peru as *Gente del Centro*) makes a reference to people's common mythical origin, the 'Hole of Awakening', or 'Hole of Humanity' located on the Igara-Paraná river (according to the Murui) (see Map 2).

## The Murui Origin Myth

- [See 1, Map 2] According to the Murui origin myth, people, in an ape-like form, were enclosed in a hole in the ground, called *Komimafo* in 'Witoto', located at the Igara-Paraná river (Appendix, excerpt 1.7-1.10).
- Upon leaving the hole, a wasp (often interpreted as a jaguar), cut off their tails and they become 'proper' people (1.11-1.16). Other group in Northwest Amazonia (besides the C-P peoples), e.g. the Kubeo (East Tucanoan), attribute their origins in a similar fashion.
- The first people were wondering around, speechless and blind, for long a long time. Electrocuted by too, they begun to see, and were not aimlessly wondering anymore (1.17-1.24).
- The first words Muinama (south) and Murui (north) spoke the first words (1.25-1.35).
- They bathed. Later they encountered, fought and killed Agaro, the mighty anaconda. They multiplied (1.36-1.60).
- They cut, cooked and ate the meat. The way this was done, influence the way the clans spoke the language (1.61-1.68).
- [2] The people left the lands, and together, they went up north (Caquetá) (1.69-70).
- They were given tobacco and coca by Father Creator (1.71-1.74).
- [3] They separated again ('Hill of division') (1.75-1.81).

## The Origin Myth as restricted knowledge

- 'public' knowledge but not for everyday discussion ('Old Testament')
- knowledge that may be revealed only at certain times and places
- restricted to particular groups within the community

## Revealing restricted knowledge

- Murui elders are rarely willing to share mythological narratives with others ('academic degree')
- For the purpose to the grammar, they for the Origin Myth to form part of the documentation:
  - political - the Murui vs. the 'Witoto',
  - social - the Origin Myth as narrated by the Ereiaí clan,
  - cultural - the limits of what is revealed ultimately up to speakers,
  - intergenerational transmission - language/culture loss,
  - other, e.g. non-Colombian/female/linguist.

## Understanding the Murui culture through the Origin Myth - beyond words

- To understand the Origin Myth goes beyond language competence.
- Breaking the restrictions on knowledge in order to make the myth understandable.
- Making the unfamiliar familiar: analysing the myth with the linguist in non-traditional ways (discussing, patiently explaining, drawing a map, etc.).

## Fieldworker's metamorphosis in the context of the Origin Myth

- Peculiar displacement - the fieldworker is displaced from their own community and culture (they suspend participation in the norms of their own culture, and are yet not a wholesale participant in the other).
- Construction of new identity - standing against the change of new identity that the fieldworker constructs and the community constructs for them.
- Experience of 'multiple lives' and considering views that are mutually contradictory.
- The power of the unveiled and the change - the more one understands, the less 'powerful' it becomes. Through the constant transformation of the fieldworker, the hidden is in constant flux.
- Linguist's responsibility to speakers on a par with responsibility to academic research.

## Importance of contextualization – ritual and invoking the Creation

- through space (*jibibiri* in the *maloca*)
- through time (during the *gairiya*)
- through speakers (right to retell, right to listen)
- through actions (coca and tobacco, participation of others, trust)
- the offer of protection - the fieldworker is subject to all manner of supernatural forces that they are not equipped to handle, and put their life/life of others in danger.

## Relation with consultants and the Origin Myth

- Giving up the control in everyday life > regaining the control as the fieldworker (right to question the unquestionable):

'I will teach you as I teach my sons but you will never be able to understand. Now ask.'  
(Lucio Agga, 2016)

- Analytical thinking about myths – the distorted space and temporality of myths.

## Telling the Myth of Origin

- Omissions to head the narrative, e.g. 'place of destruction' and *iniaki* in (1.54-55)
- Using Spanish words to assure that one understands, e.g.:
  - (1.1) *jija-kino* (base-CLF:NEWS) 'origin'
  - (1.4) *origen* 'Sp. origin'
  - (1.34) *origen* 'Sp. origin'
  - (1.80) *jija-kino* (base-CLF:INHER) 'origin'

- Elaborating on what speakers assume it is not given:
  - (1.5-7)     - Father Creator - *Juziñamui*
  - this land is our mother
  - body of our mother is the cave (cf. birth)
- Assumed knowledge, e.g. names of rivers (1.25, 1.29) vs. elaboration, e.g. Atena (1.70)

### Understanding the Myth of Origin

- Understanding by fragmentation, not as a whole (episodes)
- Understanding linguistic structures through words

e.g.     *ñeki-ro* (chambira.palm-CLF) 'string of *chambira*'  
           \**bi-ro* for 'this chambira'

>     the name of the anaconda *Agaro*

In Cubeo, a Tucanoan language, a snake would require a classifier for curved objects (Aikhenvald 2012, 311)

e.g.     formal/cultural associations  
           *nuikɨ* bird (1.44) > *nuikito* fish (1.46)

e.g.     the names of clans, the *Nogo* clan (1.63)

- Changing 'special words' for more 'general' words:

e.g. *meinega* 'kill' > *fate* 'kill' (1.59)

- Words and names have agentivity, and might be too powerful for someone who does not 'know' how to handle them, e.g. *Juziñamui* (1.5)
- Showing in objects rather than retelling, e.g. turning anaconda in (1.52)

### References

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y. 2012. *The languages of the Amazon*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eriksen, Love. 2011. *Nature and Culture in Prehistoric Amazonia: Using G.I.S. to reconstruct ancient ethnogenetic processes from archaeology, linguistics, geography, and ethnohistory*. Lund: Lund University.
- Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. 2017a. "A grammar of Murui (Bue), a Witotoan language of Northwest Amazonia." PhD dissertation, James Cook University, Cairns.
- Wojtylak, Katarzyna I. 2017b. "The languages and peoples of the Caquetá-Putumayo River Basins in Northwest Amazonia: What can we say?" Presented at Round Table Meeting of Language and Culture Research Centre, Aug 2.